

## THE HORNS AND THE SPIRAL

Distribution, structure, functions and origin of a Eurasian children's rhyme about snails  
by Giovanni Grosskopf [www.GKweb.it](http://www.GKweb.it)

### 2.2 – REMARKS ON THE GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION

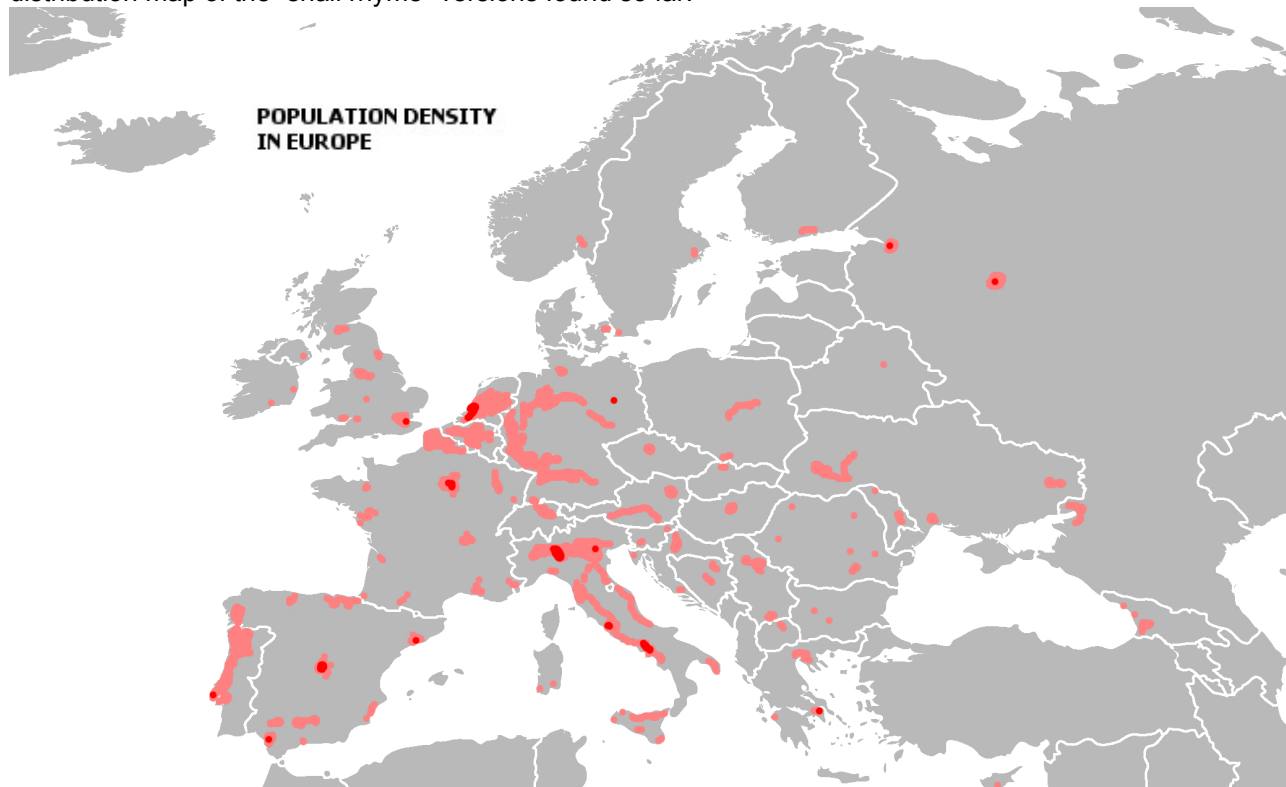
N.B.: we are referring to the maps showing the distribution of the “snail rhyme”, published at the address [www.GKweb.it/spiral](http://www.GKweb.it/spiral) concerning the research “The Horns and the Spiral” carried on by Giovanni Grosskopf and published at the address [www.GKweb.it/spiral/](http://www.GKweb.it/spiral/)

We have prepared the distribution maps of all the versions of the “snail rhyme”, studied in our research: these maps can be viewed at the address [www.GKweb.it/spiral](http://www.GKweb.it/spiral) from which can also be downloaded. We will always be referring to them in this text. What do these maps tell us? In order to understand them better, we have made or planned a series of comparisons with some phenomena.

#### First comparison: population density

First, these maps tell us a very simple fact: a larger number of variants is found in the most populated parts of Europe. This cannot be surprising: the exchange and meeting of different traditions is normally expected to happen where many people live together and, over time, it is precisely in such places that the right conditions leading to the differentiation of many further different variants are created.

To examine this phenomenon better, we have prepared a picture showing approximately the population density in Europe in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which almost tends to be coincident with our distribution map of the “snail rhyme” versions found so far:



*Population density in Europe in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

*Data freely taken from (mainly):*

*<http://www.zanichellibenvenuti.it/materiali/pdf/geografia/PACIG.benvenuti-2-C15eupopolazione.pdf>*

*and from:*

*<http://library.buffalo.edu/libraries/asl/maps/img/europe.gif>*

*The map has anyway been completely redrawn by us for this research.*

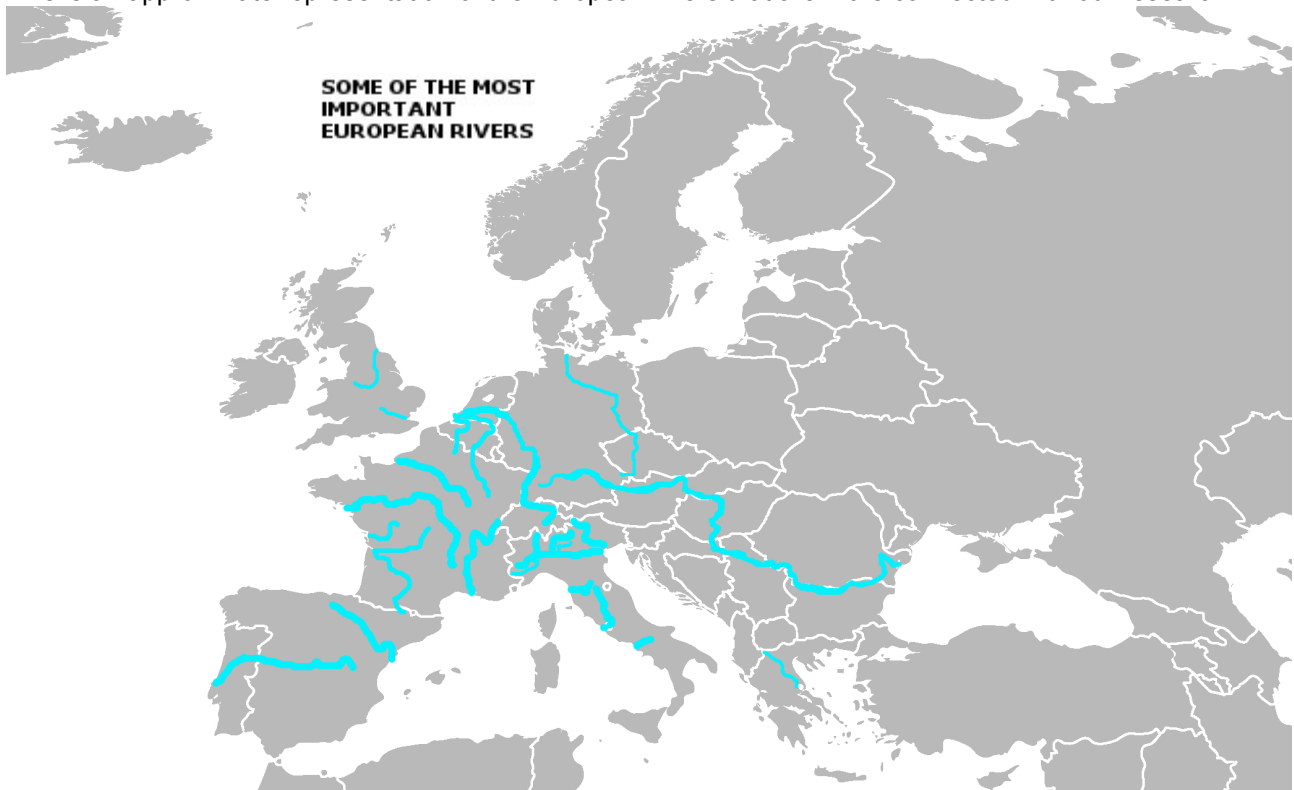
There are anyway some discrepancies: for instance, the population density is rather high in the Italian region Apulia, where our “snail rhyme” does not seem to be very present, while the population density is not very high in Sardinia and Iceland, where, on the contrary, our children's rhyme is well documented. Besides, the

rhyme is present in Armenia, but not in Georgia, more densely populated.

### **Second comparison: rivers**

Another evident coincidence can be easily detected with the paths followed by some of the main European rivers. This, too, is not surprising: the human groups, carriers of the traditions, use to move along the rivers very often, because they form convenient routes; besides, the most highly inhabited towns are very often built near the rivers and these support the agricultural activities along them.

This is an approximate representation of the European rivers that are more connected with our research:



Here, too, a substantial coincidence with our maps can be observed. In our case the rivers Danube, Po, Adige, Adda, Oglio, Ticino seem to have a major importance; a great importance can be assigned also to the rivers Rhine, Meuse, Seine, Rhone, the highest part of Loire, Garonne and Tagus and, to a lesser extent, the rivers Tiber, Arno, Volturno.

Some other rivers, like the English and Greek ones, do not seem to be as important.

### Third comparison: the Roman Empire

While examining our distribution map in Europe, sometimes one feels that it has a long story to tell us. It is actually easy to realize that our “snail rhyme” is certainly much commoner in the areas that are nowadays more densely populated, but we must remember that these have been populated along the centuries as a result of a very long colonization process which also led to build all the human settlements: one of the main historical agents in doing all this has certainly been the Roman Empire. It's rather simple to realize that, especially outside Italy, some of the most Romanized regions at the time of the Empire are precisely those in which the rhyme is nowadays most commonly found: Italy, France, the Rhine valley, the Spanish region Castile, Romania. Compare for example our distribution map of the snail rhyme with the following public domain maps:

[http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gallia\\_tribù\\_png.PNG](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Gallia_tribù_png.PNG)

[http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman\\_Empire\\_Map.png](http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_Empire_Map.png)

### Fourth comparison: language families

We can see that the distribution of the snail rhyme is different among people and territories belonging to different language families.

In detail:

- The diffusion is very high among the peoples belonging to the Germanic language family (Great Britain, Germany, The Netherlands, Dutch Belgium, Luxembourg, Austria, German-speaking Switzerland; it is much more reduced in Norway, Sweden and Denmark) and to the Romance language family (Italy, France, Spain, Walloon Belgium, Romania, Italian-speaking Switzerland, French-speaking Switzerland and, to a lesser extent, also Portugal and Romansh-speaking Switzerland); the rhyme is also present in the Baltic languages (Lithuania, Latvia).
- With regard to the Celtic languages, the rhyme is anyway well documented; in some areas which were once inhabited by Celtic peoples, but are no more inhabited by them now (most of France, Spain, Northern Italy; less in Portugal) the diffusion of our rhyme is higher, if compared to what happens in the areas where a Celtic language is still spoken today; and, within these present-day Celtic areas, the diffusion of our rhyme seems higher in the areas where the Brittonic languages are spoken (Wales, Brittany, Cornwall), if compared to the areas where the Goidelic languages are spoken (Ireland, Scotland).
- Our rhyme is well documented in the Slavic languages (Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Russia, Poland). The snail rhyme is well present in the Greek language (Greece). It is present in Albanian (Albania).
- In the Finno-Ugric languages the rhyme is very well documented and present, with some particularly interesting versions, especially among the peoples living on the Urals (Udmurts, Komi) and the Karelians, Vepsians and Sami; it is present, even if to a lesser extent, among the Finnish and the Estonians; it is very largely present among the Hungarians;
- In the Turkic languages the rhyme is present among some peoples living on the Urals, bordering with the Finno-Ugric peoples (Tatars and Bashkirs), while it seems to be a little less common elsewhere, with the exception of the territory of the Uighurs, who live in China, and Turkey, where the rhyme is present.
- The rhyme seems to be totally absent, or, at least, so scarce that it has never been documented, in Georgia. On the contrary, it is very well documented in Armenia.
- In the Basque language our rhyme is present, but, as it seems, only with one version, completely similar to the commonest Spanish versions (and so not having a differentiated tradition of its own).

It is possible that further comparisons, that we will be able to make only after an analysis of the structures, of the subjects and of the motifs found in the different versions of the rhyme, could achieve some interesting results concerning this matter.

We have also many Chinese versions (and also one Uighur version, as we already said). With regard to this, it is interesting to remember that an Indoeuropean people has actually had a remarkable importance in China: the so-called Tocharians, here to be intended as the people speaking the so-called Tocharian language (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tocharians> and also [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarim\\_mummies](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarim_mummies) ). We cannot evaluate now the possible importance of all this, especially without a thorough structural and motivic analysis of all the data we collected: it is however not completely impossible that the snail rhyme has been diffused in China by the Tocharians, both among the Han people (the ones we are now used to consider the typical Chinese people) and among the Uighurs (who are nowadays living exactly where the Tocharians used to live). Anyway, we cannot avoid to notice that, also when we consider the motifs that are typical in the Chinese versions of the snail rhyme (roasting, burning, comparing the snail to a buffalo,

mentioning the parents, a cat, a house, and saying that the snail will be killed), as well as when we consider the structure of those versions, the Chinese variants of the snail rhyme seem much closer to the Western European versions than to the Slavic versions, especially the easternmost Slavic ones. We are well aware that all this is simply a hypothetical speculation, to be evaluated after a very serious data analysis, but, so far, we think that it is still possible that it could have interesting developments.

A discontinuity between similar Chinese and Western European versions, separated by territories in which the rhyme is absent or present only with versions of the eastern Slavic type (very different from the Western and the Chinese ones, which, on the contrary, resemble each other), is certainly strange, but the Slavs, which expanded their area rather recently, taking the place of former peoples, might have given a great contribute to create the present day situation, as well as the Turkic and Mongolic invasions in the Balkans and in Central Asia and, generally speaking, the long period of the so-called "barbaric invasions". Actually, the Chinese area has been for a long time the only stable area, placed at the east of a very wide region (in practice, from Siberia to the Balkans) subject to frequent dramatic changes.

The presence in Japan (quite extensive and dating since ancient ages) is problematic and really interesting and so is the presence in Korea; these facts must have an origin which should be carefully investigated.

The presence in Northern Africa is also very interesting; we will be able to comment it better after deeper analyses.

The presence in a couple of places in Oceania (Sulawesi, Tikopia) seems to have a different interpretation, in that the documents collected in those places seem to have a less direct connection to our rhyme (even if the existence of connections seems to be certain) and seem to be probably linked to some of the earliest and most ancient phases of the development of customs related to the snail rhyme.

Going back to Europe, we need to make some remarks regarding the European areas in which the "snail rhyme" does not seem to be present:

- In Italy, we are surprised by the absence from the region Apulia, still not explained, also because snails are common in Apulia, they are traditionally eaten as food, and this region is completely surrounded by territories in which the presence of the rhyme is well documented.
- The absence from Umbria could be caused by a totally random lack of data (this region is in fact surrounded by territories in which the snail rhyme is well present, and with which it has common cultural traits, and we simply have not had a way so far to collect examples in this region).
- Strangely enough, we have not been able yet to document the presence of the rhyme on the Atlantic coast of France (except for Brittany and for the French Basque Country). We are still looking for a reasonable explanation for this.
- As for the rest of Europe, we may notice the persisting absence of the rhyme from Cyprus and moreover from Malta.

### Fifth comparison: prehistoric shell middens

It was very interesting for us to make a comparison with the studies made by David Lubell (thanks to Roberto Rattu, who suggested to check them), in two different papers of his, about the consumption of snails as food in the European prehistory and the accumulation of the shells of the eaten snails near the prehistoric human settlements in southern Europe. The results of such accumulations are usually called “shell middens”.

Here is a map showing the location of the main prehistoric shell middens in southern Europe according to Lubell:



The prehistoric shell middens in southern Europe according to David Lubell.

The map has been completely redrawn for our research.

Data source:

David Lubell, “Are land snails a signature for the Mesolithic-neolithic transition?”, *Documenta Praehistorica XXXI*, Ljubljana 2004.

David Lubell, “Prehistoric edible land snails in the circum-Mediterranean: the archaeological evidence”, J-J. Brugal & J. Desse (eds.), *Petits Animaux et Sociétés Humaines. Du Complément Alimentaire Aux Ressources Utilitaires. XXIVe rencontres internationales d'archéologie et d'histoire d'Antibes*, pp. 77-98. Antibes: Éditions APDCA, 2004.

We can notice some interesting and remarkable coincidences with our distribution maps of the snail rhyme, especially with southern France, Pyrenean France; northern Africa; perhaps the Basque Countries, Istria and Dalmatia; certainly Campania, the area of Rome, southeastern Greece, an area in Romania, southern Armenia, Sicily, an area in Serbia, and the area of Foggia in the Italian region Apulia (the only area in Apulia where faint traces of some concepts linked to our rhyme are found).

It is impressive to notice the great continuity of the location of some human settlements over time, from the first prehistoric shell middens up to our days (see southern France, Campania, Rome, the surroundings of Vienna, Athens, Malaga, Lisbona, Belgrade).

Lubell's work is particularly important because he limited himself in studying the shell middens containing only the remnants of the terrestrial snails, that is precisely the animals involved in this research, while, on the contrary, usually the prehistory scholars use to call “shell midden” – Italian *chiocciolaio*, French *escargotière*, Danish *køkkenmøddinger* – also the results of the accumulation of the shells of sea mollusks.

To end with, we must remark here the presence of a peculiar recurring sentence in some Sardinian versions of the snail rhyme:

(292) *Tzontzonredda, boga sos corros si no' ti 'occo (...) e ti che fuglio in su muntolarzu!* Little snail, stretch your horns out, otherwise I kill you (...) and I throw you into the dump!

(293) (...) *ca ghi no ti kintro a intr'e su forru. Ti scuzzo 'tir'e mazzu. Ti che fulio in su muntolarzu.*

(...) since otherwise I put you into the oven. I beat you, giving you blows with the hammer used for the wood. I throw you into the dump.

Thinking that “the dump” could be identified with the distant memory of a shell midden would actually be very suggestive... In detail, in version 293 the motif of throwing the snail in the dump is combined with that of putting it first into the oven. One could really imagine that the snail was cooked, eaten by breaking its shell with a hammer, and then the remnants of the shell were thrown into a dump (shell midden).

By the way, the famous archaeologist and Sardinian prehistory scholar Giovanni Lilliu, in his essay “La costante resistenziale sarda” (Ilisso, Nuoro, 2002), does not exclude the presence of ancient shell middens in southern Sardinia. When dealing with the prehistoric human settlements in Sardinia, he writes: “No substantial difference, with regard to the material side of life (...) seems to exist between the inhabitants of the caverns and of the shelters and those who live in open settlements, some of which (Cagliari: Poetto; Cabras: Palas de Casteddu), for the huge mounds of mollusk shells, remind us the so-called “shell middens”, typical of the Tunisian Capsian period”.

Lilliu's essay is also available at the address:

[http://www.sardegnaicultura.it/documenti/7\\_26\\_20060401174110.pdf](http://www.sardegnaicultura.it/documenti/7_26_20060401174110.pdf) .

In northern Sardinia, near the prehistoric altar of Monte d'Accoddi (Sassari), snail shells have been found in quite a large number, which can be classified as remnants of meals (E. Contu, *L'altare preistorico di Monte d'Accoddi*, Delfino, 2000, p. 55).

It is also possible, in theory, that some versions mentioning shell middens, coming from the Latin area (Latium or Campania, where the presence of shell middens has been well documented and reported also by Lubell), have survived over time in Sardinia, owing to the well-known phenomenon called by the ethnologists “marginal survival” (survival of ancient traditions in an isolated place or within isolated human groups, far from the original motherland, where they have already disappeared).

#### **Sixth comparison: the diffusion of agriculture in the European Neolithic**

According to the model of the diffusion of agriculture in Europe in the Neolithic, proposed by various scholar, among which there is Luca Cavalli-Sforza, agriculture, coming from Mesopotamia through both Anatolia and Caucasus, has probably been spread from East to West in two ways: overland and along the sea routes.

Overland, it reached Hungary, Slovakia and the Alps, then it went West (France, Iberian Peninsula, then the British Isles); it went North, perhaps along the rivers (Rhine) (Germany, then Denmark and then Scandinavia) and, after crossing the Alps, it went South, in northern Italy, perhaps again along the rivers (Po, Adige, Adda).

On the sea, starting from Anatolia it probably reached the main harbours of southern Greece, southern Italy, southern France and Catalonia.

See about this the picture at the address:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Centres\\_of\\_origin\\_and\\_spread\\_of\\_agriculture.svg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Centres_of_origin_and_spread_of_agriculture.svg)

An interesting task will therefore be to verify whether our diffusion maps of the snail rhyme are compatible or not with this model for the spreading of agriculture or have to do with it. Whether this hypothesis is likely and convincing or not is a subject that we must investigate during another phase of our research: after the structural analysis and after the mapping and analysis of the motifs present in all the versions of the rhyme, which will in fact be one of the next developments of our work.

#### **Seventh comparison: the commercial routes along the ages (obsidian, metals, amber, silk and so on)**

The commerce of obsidian has been for a long time very important in the prehistory of the Mediterranean area. Knowledge and traditions, customs and beliefs could travel and be spread along the routes associated with such commerce. These routes have been studied in detail by the archaeologist Robert H. Tykot.

If we compare the maps showing the routes of the prehistoric commerce of obsidian with the distribution map of our rhyme we obtain some coincidences, but also some clear differences (for instance, in the region Apulia in Italy), and the results are not univocal. See for example the maps at the addresses:

<http://mtboulanger.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/snapshot2009-04-0221-09-18.jpg>

<http://shell.cas.usf.edu/~rtykot/obspsc6.html>

There is no certainty about a possible role of the obsidian commerce in the diffusion of our rhyme in ancient ages. Certainly, traditions, customs and, sometimes, snail farming itself to use them as food – and therefore the snails themselves – may have been spread in some circumstances along the same paths that have been used for centuries as commercial routes.

Besides being valid for obsidian, this can apply for example also to the commerce of metals (silver, gold, iron, copper, tin) of amber (which connected the Northern European Countries to the Mediterranean) and to the commerce of silk (which connected Eastern Asia to Europe; but we must here notice the great present-day difficulties to make proper researches about the possible versions coming from Countries such as

Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Syria and also China itself).  
All these possibilities shall be taken into serious consideration.

### **Eighth comparison: monks and monasteries**

Another factor we shall consider in our research will be the foundation of new monasteries, starting from the Middle Ages, made by monks coming from other pre-existing monasteries. Monasteries have been extremely important cultural centers for centuries and places where customs, traditions and knowledges have been diffused. Sometimes, the snail farming itself has been spread through them and therefore this one, too, could have been a way through which our rhyme and the customs linked to it have been spread.

To end with, we feel like saying that other maps, concerning specific themes or motifs quoted in the different versions of the snail rhyme, will probably be able to tell us some new information which will probably be more interesting than what we can so far gather from the simple general distribution map of all the versions considered together, that we have commented here.

*This research comes legitimately only from the websites [www.GKweb.it](http://www.GKweb.it) and [www.naturamediterraneo.com](http://www.naturamediterraneo.com). Do not publish and do not use in public this research, nor whatsoever materials connected to it, without the explicit written permission of the administrators of those websites.*

[<-BACK TO INDEX](#)

[<-BACK TO INDEX](#)